

Child Abuse Prevention Month Tips

In 2003, Prevent Child Abuse America contracted with the FrameWorks Institute to determine how the public thinks about child abuse and neglect, and to develop communications strategies that will eventually increase support for, and understanding of, prevention.

We found that a major barrier to talking about prevention in a meaningful way is the public's current understanding of child abuse as extreme, dramatic, intentional and criminal. In this scenario, there is little room for many of the preventive programs and services for which we seek support. Thus, in communicating about child abuse and its prevention -- particularly during Child Abuse Prevention (CAP) Month -- there are some general guidelines that advocates for our issue can consider while talking about child abuse. It is our hope that with such messaging, we as a field will be able to slowly turn public opinion and understanding toward a more preventive angle and away from believing that child abuse can only be solved by reporting it and punishing those responsible.

Guidelines for Talking About Child Abuse and Neglect

The following is adapted from *Making the Public Case for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: A FrameWorks Message Memo*, by Susan Nall Bales, FrameWorks Institute, April 2004.

Spell out your preventive solutions at the top of the communication. The public often believes the only solutions to child abuse lie within the legal system. To make a case for prevention -- a vague word on its own -- we need to *describe* actual prevention activities that engage the entire community and explain why they are successful. In describing prevention, it is up to us to connect the dots for people so that prevention programs make sense to them. Such communications should carefully avoid implying that fixing "bad" parents is the end-all solution and bring in additional community players.

Include a clear definition of the problem, its causes and solutions while making your case for prevention. This should be careful not to focus on *people* in the abusive situation, but rather on the predictable *situations* in which abusive behavior happens: poverty, divorce, addiction, drug abuse, stress, limited education, job loss, isolation, etc. Language is important here. Instead of referencing parents, talk about the families that children live in and the pressures surrounding them. Prevention programs work to connect families to needed resources, and to ensure healthy development for children. Such programs are likely to pique public interest and support more than those perceived to help "bad" parents.

Avoid vivid, dramatic details and the focus on the worst cases, as well as on sexual abuse as the dominant form of abuse, as these only serve to reinforce people's current understanding of abuse as specifically a criminal issue. When exposed primarily to dramatic cases (which the media favor), people tend to conclude that abuse is inevitable because it involves bad people who are bad parents. The solution that makes sense to them, then, is to remove children from danger and punish those responsible. While vigils for abuse victims, visual representations of the number of children killed or reported, and references to specific dramatic cases will undoubtedly attract media attention, they will also reinforce this mindset.

Wherever possible, tell stories of efficacy -- demonstrate how programs and policies have worked for the benefit of children by predicting and addressing abusive situations before they



happened. Doing so increases the idea of situations, not people, as the appropriate focus for child abuse interventions. For a list of approaches and success stories, see the National Clearinghouse of Child Abuse and Neglect Information's page http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/what_works/index.cfm#prevention.

Forget the numbers for explaining the prevalence of abuse. People believe it is a big problem and they tend to overstate it numerically (as they do many social problems they deem important). Correcting their error is only likely to result in diminished concern for the problem. Therefore, it is not a good idea to pair prevention activities and announcements with the release of your state's annual child abuse statistics. Also remember that if you give these numbers to the media, the story will almost certainly lead with them.

Stop fighting the fight we've won by continuing to convince people of the prevalence and seriousness of child abuse. It is time to shift to deepening citizens' understanding of the problem and its solutions, not to continue with attention-getting or agenda-setting. We believe child abuse prevention is not receiving adequate public support not because people aren't outraged by the issue, but because they stop at outrage and lack credible solutions beyond reporting.

Try to get multiple actors into the picture and avoid communications that imply that abuse is only a family issue, solved by outsiders who "save" or "punish." Try to broaden the discussion to the larger community.

Don't issue confusing or conflicting calls to action such as asking outsiders to both befriend and report troubled families. The message should either be about prevention – family support, parent education, family-friendly policies, child development initiatives – or reporting. Addressing both at the same time is confusing. Promoting support asks the reader for empathy, while issuing calls for people to report asks for vigilance and judgment.

General Media Tips

Stay on message. Narrow your message to one or two central points that you want to get across and stick to them. You do not have to explicitly answer every question a reporter poses. Answer every question in such a way that it reflects your key message. Do not repeat something a reporter says that is not part of your point, even to disagree with it. For instance, by saying "child abuse is not just dramatic cases of parents killing their children," you remind your audience of parents killing children.

Emphasize that April is about solutions to child abuse. It's about prevention, but don't leave the word "prevention" unexplained. Describe the solutions. Keep in mind that reporters will usually try to move you back to drama and tragedy, but you can stress that child abuse is a problem with solutions that don't receive the attention they should. Explain that the American public cares deeply about child abuse, but doesn't know what can be done about it.

Reporters will want statistics. Instead of supplying them with the traditional child abuse statistics on reports, substantiations and deaths, give them stats on efficacy. What works? How many people do you reach with services? What has been the impact of such services?

Letters to the editor are a great way to reach a general audience. Keep them short and focused and be sure to include a call to action whether it is to support specific legislation or to learn more about a program.



Sample Language

Based on the guidelines above, here is some general language about Child Abuse Prevention Month that could be adapted for press releases announcing events, letters to the editor or website announcements.

The month of April is devoted to celebrating everything we can do to transform our community into a place that cares about – and actively supports -- families and children. By ensuring that all parents in our community have access to quality childcare, affordable health services, parenting education resources, and substance abuse and mental health programs, we make progress toward what the month stands for: April is Child Abuse Prevention Month.

The majority of child abuse cases stem from situations and conditions that are entirely preventable in an engaged and supportive community. A community that cares about early childhood development, parent support and maternal mental health, for instance, is more likely to see families nurturing children who are born healthy and enter school ready to learn. Cities and towns that work to create good school systems and who come together to ensure that affordable housing is available in good, safe neighborhoods are less likely to see stressed, isolated families who don't know where to turn.

Child Abuse Prevention Month is about connecting all of these dots so that the solutions to child abuse receive the attention the public craves. In a recent poll, 89% of Americans reported that child abuse was a “very important” moral issue to them¹. But it's not enough to care about the problem and address its consequences. We have to pay attention to the kinds of efforts that will prevent it from happening in the first place. So this April, learn more about what you and your community can do to support child abuse prevention. It's a shared responsibility and we're stronger together.

Find out more about child abuse prevention in your community [add contact information here].

Sample Interview Answers

The following are actual questions posed by a CNN interviewer during an interview following a dramatic child abuse case. The suggested answers are based on the guidelines above.

Background: “The gruesome killing of a six-year-old girl in Atlanta grabbed headlines earlier this week. She was found dead in a hotel room strangled, stabbed and beaten. Police say the child was brutalized and have charged her parents with murder. This case is raising questions about the frequency of child abuse.”

Q: First of all, this case in Georgia is not an isolated incident. Abuse of children is happening by the thousands in this country every year, isn't it?

A: We are certainly losing too many children to conditions and situations that are entirely preventable. Child maltreatment happens when people find themselves in stressful situations and don't know how to cope. There are plenty of sensible ways to prevent that from happening. We know much about the kind of support that families need, and how to create the kinds of communities that really value kids. One example of a program that is successful at this is Healthy Families America, a community-based program that offers all kinds of useful information to new



¹ Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University, February 2005
Contact info: Marketing and Communications at Prevent Child Abuse America, 312.663.3520.
All of the FrameWorks research is also available on our website:
http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/frame_analysis/index.html.

parents. This kind of program bolsters parents' confidence, reduces stress and isolation, and – importantly – sends the message to parents that information and support is available.

Q: You know, as a parent, it is hard to fathom why a parent or caretaker would hurt a child. Help us get some understanding of what brings them to this point.

A: We know what causes child maltreatment, and many of those causes are linked to the changing nature of our communities – increased economic stress and isolation combined with fewer resources to support families, particularly those that face special hardships. Conditions such as job loss, divorce, poverty and addiction – and the stress and isolation that accompany these – can also be breeding grounds for maltreatment. Communities can make sure that parents have access to the kinds of programs and services that reduce risk factors for abuse – such as programs that work to strengthen families and increase parents' knowledge and confidence. We can – and should – provide families with adequate resources such as health insurance, child care, and parent education. By keeping focused on anything that leads to stable families and healthy child development, we'll help to reduce the likelihood that child abuse ever occurs in the first place.

Q: You know, having been personally involved with this cause, I know that this is a sort of vicious cycle -- people who have been abused often become violent people or criminals.

A: It's certainly true that children's early years are extremely important in terms of their development, and that getting them off to a good start lessens the likelihood that they will have problems later on. We know, for example, that adverse childhood experiences can be responsible for not only an increased likelihood of criminal behavior, but also increased substance abuse, health problems such as heart disease and obesity, and increased likelihood of risky behavior such as smoking. We can get ahead of all of these negative outcomes by making sure each child has a healthy environment. And the way to do that is to support their families.

Q: Well, I know that Prevent Child Abuse [America] has a wonderful program called Healthy Families [America] helping to stop the cycle. So, help us to understand the facts.

A: Healthy Families America works with new parents in their homes to increase their confidence in parenting. It's a community-based program that works with other services across a region so that parents know what's out there and what's available to them. This kind of program can be helpful to all parents, but particularly those that might be feeling isolated or unprepared. It's really a great way for them to become engaged in their communities early on and to help create healthy environments for their children.

Q: I know you don't go in and target people that necessarily have the potential to abuse, but what are some of the risk factors? I mean, this is something that spans over all socio-economic groups.

A: Raising children is tough even under ideal circumstances, and fewer families today have the luxury of living in ideal circumstances. Whenever and wherever you combine increasing stress on the family with a lack of community resources to support families and parents, you are creating a situation in which child abuse and neglect are more likely to occur. We need to create communities that really value and support all families in the important job of raising their kids, and provide all families with access to early childhood programs, reliable childcare, and accessible parent education and support services. And we need to offer programs and services to address the more extreme problems that families face – such as substance abuse or mental health issues.



Contact info: Marketing and Communications at Prevent Child Abuse America, 312.663.3520.

All of the FrameWorks research is also available on our website:

http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/frame_analysis/index.html.

Effective Strategies

When relating stories of successful prevention strategies, it is important to connect the dots from the program to the prevention of child abuse. Given the public's overwhelming tendency to think about child abuse in its worst forms, the term "child abuse prevention" holds little meaning to them outside of reporting. Thus, describing a parent support program as an example of child abuse prevention will not make sense to them without some explanation. The Children's Bureau connects these dots well in its 2005 Child Abuse Prevention Month Packet. The following is adapted from it:

Community leaders are increasingly thinking about the personal, family, and environmental matters that strengthen families and reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. Research shows that while some things have harmful effects on children and families, others can alleviate those effects and provide benefits to parents and children. Successful family support activities and child abuse prevention programs are designed to promote these protective factors, which include:

- Parental confidence and knowledge
- Strong bonds between parents and children
- Family social connections - to decrease isolation
- Family knowledge of child development
- Effective problem solving and communication skills
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children are socially and emotionally capable
- Healthy marriages

Research has found that the following are effective strategies that family support and child abuse prevention programs can use to bolster these protective factors:

- **Facilitate friendships and support.** Offer opportunities for parents in the neighborhood to get to know each other, develop support systems, and take leadership roles. Strategies may include sports teams, potlucks, classes, advisory groups, board leadership and volunteer opportunities.
- **Strengthen parenting.** Develop ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it. Possibilities include classes, support groups, home visits, tip sheets in pediatricians' offices and resource libraries.
- **Respond to family crises.** Offer extra support to families when they need it, as in times of illness, job loss, housing problems and other stressors.
- **Link families to services and opportunities.** Provide referrals for job training, education, health care, mental health and other essential services in the community.
- **Support children's social and emotional development.** Some programs specifically focus on helping children articulate their feelings and get along with others. When children bring home what they learn in the classroom, parents benefit as well.

Adapted from Building on Strengths: Enhancing Protective Factors for Children and Families, National Clearinghouse of Child Abuse and Neglect Information.

http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/what_works/building.cfm



Contact info: Marketing and Communications at Prevent Child Abuse America, 312.663.3520.

All of the FrameWorks research is also available on our website:

http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/frame_analysis/index.html